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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE RELIGION OF THE HEBREWS AND MODERN SCHOLARSHIP. IV

J. M. POWIS SMITH

IV. The Value of Hebrew Religion

The aim of this final study is to discover what, in the opinion of the scholars themselves, is the result of the application of critical methods as they affect the religion of Israel. Is the Old Testament a more or less valuable book than before the modern point of view became regnant? The same general answer is presented by all of the authors selected for study; but the variations of viewpoint and of vision within this general agreement are by no means insignificant. The books chosen are: (1) G. Adam Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament* (1901); (2) W. G. Jordan, *Biblical Criticism and Modern Thought* (1909); (3) A. White Vernon, *The Religious Value of the Old Testament* (1907); and (4) H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (1913).

George Adam Smith constitutes an excellent guide for the start. The spirit of his work is entirely irenic and, what is of more importance, the whole discussion breathes an atmosphere of true religion. It is quite clear that Professor Smith cares as much about the religious significance of the Old Testament as does the most anxious of his readers. Further, if any man knows

how to preach from the Old Testament with power, surely George Adam Smith does. His expositions of the prophets, in the *Expositor's Bible*, are unsurpassed in expository preaching upon the Old Testament. The theme he selected for these lectures to the Divinity School of Yale University was an eminently fitting one.

The best two lectures are those on "Immortality" and on the "Preaching of the Prophets to Their Own Times." Here the consciously apologetic attitude is less conspicuously present than elsewhere and the strictly historical and interpretative attitude is correspondingly more in evidence. The least satisfactory chapters are the two on the "Proof of a Divine Revelation" and the "Spirit of Christ in the Old Testament." In the very nature of the case revelation cannot be proved; very little that is of great worth can be so conclusively demonstrated. As to the spirit of Christ, it seems sometimes as though Dr. Smith was a little too eager to make out a case.

Suffice it now to throw out some questions provocative of thought for the readers of the book. Jesus is claimed as our chief authority for the value of the Old Testament. Is this a truly

historical position? Can the value of a collection of literature be made dependent for us upon the judgment of anyone but ourselves? What would a Jew say to Jesus as the chief authority on this matter? Is not the self-evidencing power of the truth itself the best authority?

Is it sufficient for the historical student to say that the only explanation of Israel's monotheism is to be found in revelation, or that Israel's knowledge of God was due to the authentic, personal action of God himself? How were that action and that revelation mediated? Did God reveal himself through normal, everyday experience or are we to think of some exceptional inroad into consciousness?

The lectures everywhere represent the activity and influence of Yahweh, or God, in a very objective and tangible fashion. Indeed, in this respect, they are truly biblical. Does this mean that the world of Old Testament times was in different relationship to God from the modern world? Or should we revise our whole attitude of mind and speak of the activity and influence of God today in the same personal and objective way?

As a matter of fact, is not the art of preaching from the Old Testament in the light of historical study a much more difficult one than it was when the proof-text method was all-sufficient? In order to present an Old Testament message effectively, it is necessary nowadays to reproduce for the listening people the situation out of which the message came and to show the points of contact between that age and our own and the consequent adaptation of

the prophetic message of former times to our own times. All this calls for much time and hard study; but the investment of energy yields large returns. No better models for this kind of preaching can be found than those of George Adam Smith himself.

Professor Jordan's book has the same practical aim as Principal Smith's, as is shown by its subtitle, *The Place of the Old Testament Documents in the Life of Today*. The first nine chapters present a general summary of the results of the application of critical methods to the documents of the Old Testament. The last five attempt an evaluation of these results from various points of view. In general, the attitude and spirit of this book are less restrained than is the case with the work of Principal Smith. Jordan's critical movements are not fettered. He sees that the only proper procedure is to encourage criticism to do her perfect work, leaving theology and religion to adjust themselves to the facts that are thereby revealed, whether such adjustment should involve enrichment or impoverishment. For himself, however, Jordan is perfectly satisfied that the critical treatment of the Old Testament means in practically every way much gain.

Jordan furnishes an excellent introduction to many phases of Old Testament study. He approaches the subject from many different angles. He pays much attention, especially in the appendix, to the works of many scholars and gives quite an extended selection of bibliography. His criticism of the late Professor Orr's attack upon the critical school is keen and thoroughgoing. His reply to the charge that archaeology

has overthrown criticism is equally satisfactory and his treatment of the so-called Pan-Babylonian question is eminently sane. In his presentation of the "struggles and survivals" in Hebrew religion, it may be doubted whether he has given sufficient weight to the evidence for the existence of ancestor-worship and the survival of human sacrifice in Israel as a part of Yahweh-worship. Setting forth the effect of criticism upon the preacher's task, he emphasizes the fact that the correct homiletical use of the Old Testament is much more difficult than it was upon the older systems of interpretation; but it is correspondingly more fruitful.

Does Jordan, however, go the whole distance? Is not the Old Testament, in reality, merely the record of the religious experience of one small section of the human race? Must we not approach it and evaluate it more consciously from the comparative point of view? Has God confined himself at any time in human history to any one people? Has he not made himself known in the experience of all men? Can we speak of "revelation" in Israel and deny it elsewhere? If the "revelation" of God is universal, what differentiates one "revelation" from another? Must not the religion of the Hebrews be judged solely upon its merits without regard to any theory as to its origin? In the light of such questions, is the Old Testament rightly esteemed as the record of the richest and most inspiring religious experience of pre-Christian ages?

In turning to Dr. Vernon's little book, let these questions be kept well in mind. It will be noted that this writer speaks from the standpoint of

"the most outspoken modern scholarship" and that he believes that it "ministers to our religious needs and to the appreciation of the supreme religious value of the Old Testament." This is surely all that could be desired. The three chapters on the older view of the Old Testament set forth in clear incisive phrase and with keen insight its value, its defects, and its untenability. We may differ from Dr. Vernon in some of his judgments; for example, is prediction adequately described as an expression of 'the moral insight of majestic men who spoke as they were moved, not by a magic, but by the Holy, Ghost'? Is ritual always "an evidence of religious stagnation"? Was it really so in Hebrew religion? But in the main, Dr. Vernon's verdict will command the approval of modern scholars.

In the exposition of the contribution of the modern view of the Old Testament, Dr. Vernon selects three elements for emphasis. In general, they are all included in the fact that the Old Testament shows us the making of our religion. We are brought by it into sympathetic contact with the great discoverers of religious truth and power. We see how they learned of God and righteousness, and we discover that there was no mysterious element in their experience, save such as is common to man. We are thus given a glimpse of the possibilities for religious growth and attainment that lie within reach of our own and of every generation. We too can further the cause of religious progress. We discover also that these great souls wrought out their religious experience in the midst of commonplace duties and nerve-racking problems that were

of the same sort as those amid which we live. It was by this very process of struggle and toil that strength for achievement was developed. Such a reading of the Old Testament means to many men a new revelation of God and of the glory of living.

A few words must be said to call attention to Robinson's *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*. This book belongs naturally with the first of our four studies, but it has only just been received from the publisher. The title indicates its method, which is to take up one by one the great religious ideas and study them in their historical development. This has some advantages; for we are thus enabled to concentrate our attention upon any given idea. It has also disadvantages; for we can properly appreciate an idea only when it is brought into closest contact with all of the related ideas and circumstances which went into its shaping. It also involves somewhat of repetition. The last chapter of this book gives a fresh statement of the "permanent value of the Old Testament," which adds something to the statements we have already considered. The appendix gives a carefully selected list of books on each chapter of the text. The book as a whole is well worth reading and is of the sort to be appreciated by any man of intelligent culture.

Other works discussing the value of the old Testament are:

J. E. McFadyen, *Old Testament Criticism and Christian Church* (1903).

C. F. Kent, *The Origin and Permanent Value of the Old Testament* (1906).

W. C. Selleck, *The New Appreciation of the Bible* (1907).

M. Dods, *The Bible, Its Origin and Nature* (1905).

J. M. Thomas, *The Christian Faith and the Old Testament* (1908).

E. Kautzsch, *Die bleibende Bedeutung des Alten Testaments* (1903).

Whatever we may think of the legitimacy of the historical method in general, or the various specific applications made of it, the fact is indisputable that by reason of it a new interest has been aroused in the Bible. Never before was there such activity in Bible-study and interpretation as these modern days and modern methods have developed. The results of excavation and exploration have been laid hold of with avidity and utilized gratefully and effectively in the illumination of the written word. Scholarship of the highest rank has been laboriously attained and unstintingly poured out upon the interpretation of the Bible. Biblical interpretation has been raised to the level of other humanistic studies and needs not to hang its head in shame among its brethren. The new view of the Bible and its significance has taken hold of the mind of the church. The modern Christian or Jewish scholar is eager to know all that can possibly be discovered by any method regarding the origin and character of his sacred books. Some have pursued scholarly research for the purpose of defending dearly cherished dogmas; others have sought thereby to gain new conceptions of Scripture and of Scripture's God; from both sides has come much gain in every way to the cause of the science of biblical interpretation.

For the modern man, the great blessing of modern historical study is that it

has given him a new Bible. This Book of Books, as he still, with full understanding, calls it, has been brought down out of the clouds and been found to have been deeply rooted in human experience. Its words come to the historical student with new significance. For he sees how they were at times wrought out in the furnace of affliction and at other times wrung from the souls of men tossed about by the same billows of doubt that buffet him. The Bible has been made a more human book, and not one whit less divine. The religion of the Bible has come to be recognized as the finest product of the religious experience of a

great people. It thus comes to the modern man as an inspiration and a challenge. Men of old sought after God and found him and out of that search they spoke burning words to their fellows. The same possibilities and opportunities for the knowledge of the divine will and for the interpretation of it in terms of our present problems are available to the men of today. From the way in which the spiritual heroes of the Hebrews faced their problems and solved them for their times, men may obtain invaluable inspiration and guidance for the conduct of the work of the world today.

SUGGESTIONS TO LEADERS OF CLASSES USING THE ORIGIN AND TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS¹

With this study we come to the close of Paul's visible ministry and to those final messages which show his tender solicitude for all those who had been his faithful friends, and for those larger groups which we have since his day denominated the "churches" which he organized.

Paul in prison, writing these latest letters, or the letters upon which they were based, was no less vigorous a fighter than when facing the perils of difficult journeys or threatening mobs.

But to plant Christianity was one thing, to preserve it another. The Judaizers had not ceased to work. Even more subtle was the danger that the followers of Jesus should regard Christianity as a philosophical system rather than a vital life, and that different types of Christianity should split the church into small and ineffective parties,

losing sight in intellectual quibbling of the real message of salvation from sin through faith in Jesus Christ.

And greater than even these intellectual dangers were those deep-seated habits of life which the heathen religions not only countenanced but encouraged, habits individual and social which choked spirituality and defeated that control of oneself and one's powers which Paul so earnestly sought to exalt.

Paul was fully conscious of all these dangers. Yet his letters show no fear that Christianity will be lost to the world. Such a result his faith could not permit. But rather he labored with his last breath to contribute his share to the progress of the new religion, glorying in his opportunity to serve his master in a cause that must triumph.

¹ The suggestions relate to the fourth month's work, the student's material for which appeared in the *Biblical World* for December and may be obtained in pamphlet reprints for use with classes. Address: THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE, The University of Chicago.